

THE AFRICAN CALIPHATE 2

The African Caliphate 2
Ideals, Policies and Operation
of the Sokoto Caliphate

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DIWAN  PRESS

Classical and Contemporary Books on Islam and Sufism

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Published by: Diwan Press Ltd.
311 Allerton Road
Bradford
BD15 7HA
UK
Website: www.diwanpress.com
E-mail: info@diwanpress.com

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A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN-13: 978-1-914397-13-4 Casebound
978-1-914397-14-1 Paperback
978-1-914397-15-8 ePub and Kindle

Contents

Chapter One – A Home for Islam	1
The Ideological Divide	2
The Directive Principles	6
Chapter Two – A New Dispensation	12
Muhammad Bello: <i>Amir Al-Muminin</i>	12
The Constitutional Issues: Abdullahi vs. Bello	15
Reintegrating a Crumbling Edifice	19
Unity and Rapprochement	22
Chapter Three – The Winds of Change	25
The Change in Borno	26
The Revolution of Seku Ahmadu	34
The Revolution of Umar Al-Futi	36
The Revolution in Yorubaland	40
Why This Phenomenon?	43
Chapter Four – The Theory of Government	44
The Imamate	44
The <i>Shura</i>	52
Key Political Institutions	54
Establishment of Justice	57
Preservation of Social Morality	63
Public Welfare	66
The Defence of Islam	73
Chapter Five – The Conception of Law	80
A New Legal Process Advocated	80
The <i>Shari'a</i> in a Changing World	84
<i>Siyasat al-Shar'iyya</i>	88
<i>Shari'a</i> in the Political Process	93
Chapter Six – The Encounter with the West	97
Mungo Park's Mission to the Niger	98
The Mission to Borno	103

Clapperton in Sokoto Caliphate	110
The Wall had been Breached	113
Chapter Seven – Abdullahi Bade His Farewell	117
Abdullahi on Foundation of Life	117
Abdullahi on Ethical Values	122
Abdullahi on Morality	128
Abdullahi on <i>Uswatun Hasana</i>	132
Abdullahi on Sufism	136
The Man, Abdullahi	139
Chapter Eight – The Policies	143
On Principles of Statecraft	143
Socio-Economic Development	145
Human Mobilization	150
Foreign Policy	155
Chapter Nine – The Imam	161
Commitment to Allah	161
Family Obligations	167
Obligation to Society	169
Women as the <i>Umma’s</i> Conscience	171
Unity of the <i>Umma</i>	175
The Epilogue to a Life	178
Chapter Ten – A Sense of History	182
Conception of History	182
The Vicissitudes of Time	187
And Behold, Darkness Fell	192
A Ray of Light in the Darkness	195
Glossary	198

Chapter One

A Home for Islam

The Sokoto Caliphate emerged from the *tajdid* process which was led by Shehu Usman Dan Fodio (1754-1817). The process of the revolution itself started in 1774, when Shehu Usman was about twenty years old, and culminated in the establishment of *dar al-Islam*, generally known as the Sokoto Caliphate, around 1803. Shehu Usman's death in 1817 brought to an end what we may call the revolutionary phase in the history of the Caliphate, heralding a new phase which covered a period of just over twenty years, from 1817 to 1837. It is that phase, in which the Caliphate was nurtured, with care, anxiety and pain, into the Islamic state and a centre of gravity for Islam in West Africa that is the subject of this study. We are concerned here mainly with the ideals that nourished the Caliphate, enabling it to grow from the city-state of Gobir into a West African super-state, as well as with the architect of it all, *Amir al-Muminin*, Muhammad Bello.

Our first task in this study is to reflect on the ideological basis of this *dar al-Islam*, as espoused by its founding father, Shehu Usman Dan Fodio. It must be said from the outset that the Shehu – as the father of the revolution is generally known – remained the symbol of the Caliphate, its central focus and final arbiter in moments of crisis, for as long as the Islamic dispensation lasted. Even to this day, he remains the veritable symbol of the Muslim *umma* in a considerable part of West Africa. The works of his which we shall be examining presently are as follows: *Kitab al-Farq*, *Siraj al-Ikhwān*; *Najm al-Ikhwān*; *Ta'lim al-Ikhwān*; *Tanbih al-ikhwan*; *Tamyiz Ahl al-Sunna*; *Tamyiz al-Muslimin min al-Kafirin* and *Nasihāt Ahl al-Zaman*.

The Ideological Divide

Mankind is divided, in its beliefs and ideologies, into two distinct categories – the unbelievers and the believers. This is the truth attested to in the Qur'an, where it is said: *'It is He who created you. Yet among you are unbelievers and among you are believers.'* (64:2) This divide, which transcends race and social and economic differences, lies at the very root of most, if not all, historical struggles. The believer struggles to make Islam supreme, the unbeliever struggles to make his faith supreme. The difference that exists between a believer and an unbeliever is not merely one of opinion: it is a profound difference, embracing at once ideals, morality, politics, culture and attitudes. No society exists in an ideological vacuum: all societies subscribe to a set of beliefs and assumptions which dictate their conduct, law and attitudes, as well as their goals. This is what creates the difference, and, in most cases the conflict, between one society and another, between one political and social persuasion and another, between one civilization and another.

The *tajdid* process was no different from this historical imperative: it was essentially a struggle between believers and unbelievers; and, in a political context, a struggle between tyrants and the advocates of justice. In short, the Sokoto dispensation was a repetition of the ever-recurrent drama involving the conflict between David and Goliath. In a struggle of this kind, you start first by cultivating your ideals and rebuilding the human mind according to them; you challenge the forces of decadence and oppression, who then strike back. As unbelief or tyranny feels more and more threatened, it resorts to coercion, bringing into being the phases of *hijra* and *jihad*. The latter is the most intensive stage in the process of *tajdid*: it serves, on the one hand, to purge the revolution of its wayward elements and graces some of its sincere elements with martyrdom; and on the other hand, *jihad* serves as a cleansing exercise, to rid the world of tyranny, together with its institutions and the men who symbolise it. To that extent, such a revolution, despite the bloodshed and destruction associated with it, can be seen as a blessing in its elimination of oppression and its creation of a new world with definite moral values and social commitment. People are given a new lease of life and a sense of direction after a long period of decay and aimlessness.

In the specific situation of Hausaland, this struggle was carried out on two levels – one intellectual and the other political. The first level involved an understanding of who was a Muslim – a believer – on the one hand and who was a non-Muslim – an unbeliever – on the other. This is the theme of many works of the Shehu, particularly those written during the *hijra-jihad* phase. In both *Tamyiz al-Muslimin* and *Siraj al-Ikhwani*ⁱ a Muslim is defined as a person who affirms his belief in Allah and in Muhammad as His Messenger, who keeps his faith pure and safeguards it against corruption, and practises Islam as laid down in the *shari'a* to the best of his ability. Moreover, he does not mingle Islamic belief or practices with those of *kufir*, nor mock or deny any of the essential elements of Islamic faith and practice. An unbeliever, on the other hand, is a person who does not affirm sound belief in Allah and His Messenger; he worships idols of all sorts; he mingles the practices of Islam with those of *kufir* – such as prostrating to trees and venerating pagan places of worship – even though he might claim to be a Muslim; and he speaks lightly of Islam and ridicules its sacred institutions.

Even though the distinction was sharp enough, the Shehu felt it necessary, in *Tamyiz Ahl al-Sunna*, to distinguish between those who desired the victory of Islam over *kufir* and those who did not mind where the victory went. A Muslim, in those circumstances, was not merely a person who believed *per se*, but rather a person who both believed and practised Islam and, in addition, hated unbelief, its symbols and men. An outright association with Islam and solidarity with fellow Muslims was demanded as an additional mark of belief. A person who, in spite of being a Muslim, fraternised with unbelievers and innovators and sought worldly benefits from them was, to all intents and purposes, a hypocrite but nevertheless remained a member of the *umma*, however tenuous his membership might appear to be.

All this was an attempt, on the part of the *tajdid* movement, to unite the Muslims on a clear-cut ideological basis and to consolidate their ranks. It was also an effort to instil in them the consciousness

i Published in 1960s by Northern Nigerian Government but now apparently out of print. Its full title is *Siraj al-Ikhwani fi Ahamm ma Ahtaj ilayhi fi hadha Zaman*. It was written as an apology for the revolution.

of being a distinct and separate community, socially, morally, and ideologically. This fraternal solidarity of believers was meant to cover not only the pursuit of a common cause – the victory of Islam – but also the social relationships between the believers in a way that would identify them as an *umma* distinct from the rest of the people – as prestigious members of the family of Allah. ‘I urge you, O people of the Sunna,’ the Shehu declared in *Tamyiz Ahl al-Sunna*, ‘to seek out your fellow believers whenever you travel; to associate with them, stay with them on your journeys; eat with them and offer them gifts, your assistance and help. Whoever does this will die a believer, and Allah will answer his prayer whenever he supplicates to Him.’ At the same time, the people of the Sunna had to keep their distance from those who were the declared enemies of Allah. ‘How,’ the Shehu asked, ‘could anyone claim to be a lover of Allah if he fraternised with His enemies?’ Here the Shehu seemed to be saying that the notion of *ahl al-sunna* is not merely a question of doctrine; it is in a fundamental sense a question of ideological and moral commitment. Whoever genuinely strives to make Islam victorious belongs to the *ahl al-sunna*, and is a member of the family of Allah. And whoever fraternises with the un-Islamic forces and does not care about the progress of Islam cannot claim to belong to that noble fraternity.

On the political front, the process of integrating the Muslims into one large and loving family of Allah naturally led to a desire on their part to look for the ‘home of Islam’, the home of justice, as opposed to the home of the tyranny to whose rule they had been subjected. There was no doubt about the intellectual and moral superiority, which Muslims have over the unbelievers, and Shehu Usman’s intensive educational, spiritual and moral programmes helped to sharpen the social consciousness of those who were being mobilized for change. It was this consciousness, which permeated all corners of society, that alarmed the ruling class – the oppressors. Muslims gained awareness of the fact that idol-worshippers, corrupt and inept rulers and tyrants had no moral right to rule over them and be their masters. It was beneath their dignity as believers to subordinate themselves to such tyrants. They had a duty, they were told, to seek the means to live as Muslims, to secure their own dignity and the

integrity of Islam – in short, to overthrow the unbelieving power and establish the *dar al-Islam*.

In both *Ta'lim al-Ikhwān*ⁱ and *Tanbih al-Ikhwān*ⁱⁱ the Shehu justified his rising in arms against the Sudanese kings. Four broad reasons were given. Firstly, most of the rulers were idol-worshippers. The Hausa rulers in particular, the Shehu stated in *Ta'lim al-Ikhwān*, paid homage to trees and stones, made animal sacrifices to them and turned to them for the fulfilment of their needs. Thus they were unbelievers, even if they prayed and fasted and performed other rites of Islam. Secondly, the Sudanese kings consciously obstructed the path of Islam: they prevented people from becoming Muslim, persecuted those who had already joined its fold and organised their policies to favour pagan customs and institutions. They therefore, in Shehu's eyes, behaved in the manner of Pharaoh, and rising against them was perfectly justified. Thirdly, the kings were secular rulers: while pretending outward respect for Islam and its institutions and values, they, nevertheless, subordinated Islam to secular considerations and policies. They never, for example, fought in the name of Islam in their numerous wars, nor undertook the spread and consolidation of Islam. Instead they devoted themselves wholly to this world, acquiring its glory as avidly as they could.

Finally, in spite of all these considerations, it was not the Muslims who started the fight; it was the unbelieving powers that tried to crush them and annihilate Islam, as we are told in *Tanbih al-Ikhwān*. The revolution was, therefore, provoked by the need of the Muslims to defend their faith, their lives, their family and their possessions. In other words, the *jihād* was forced on the Shehu and his movement, the *Jama'a*. The final stages before the revolution exploded were described by Abdullahi Dan Fodio whom the Shehu quoted in *Tanbih*:

i BG. Martin's translation has been used here. See his 'Unbelief in the Western Sudan: Uthman dan Fodio's *Ta'lim al-Ikhwān*' in *Middle Eastern Studies*, 4, 1967-8, pp. 50-97.

ii Palmer's translation is referred to here. See his 'An Early Fulani Conception of Islam'. *Journal of African Studies*, 13, 14, 1914-15.

So we fled from their land in the year 1218 A.H. [1803]... to a place outside Gobir territory. The Muslims all fled, following us. Many of them joined us with their people and property; some brought nothing but their people; some came with no following at all. The Sultan of Gobir ordered his chiefs to seize the goods of all who fled or prevent them leaving. Then he ordered those of the chiefs nearest to us on the East to keep on killing our people, and plundering and imprisoning. The people suffered sorely.

And Hausaland, in consequence, exploded. The Hausa establishment, by seeking to crush Islam, brought about its own end.

On the whole, the revolution was effected, as in all other Islamic revolutions, not in order for one set of people to annihilate another, or gain political ascendancy and land. It was principally aimed to achieve four things: to make the word of Allah supreme; to bring unbelief, corruption and tyranny to naught; to bring dignity and honour to Muslims and save them from the humiliation of having to live under an un-Islamic power; and finally to give people – Muslims and non-Muslims alike – the opportunity to enjoy a life in a territory ennobled by faith, permeated by morality and justice.

The Directive Principles

It may be worthwhile here to attempt to piece together some of the principles which the Shehu himself, especially in the last days of his life, put forward as a guide for state policy for all time. One could see in the Shehu an ardent desire to ensure the survival of the Caliphate, for which he had fought so hard. One need only go through the account of the *jihad* and what it reveals of the long and arduous trek – covering hundreds of miles – that Muslims had to undergo, enduring starvation, epidemics, deprivation, insecurity and death, to see how much they had invested to attain their *dar al-Islam*. ‘Our country was ruined,’ lamented Muhammad Bello in *Infaq al-Maysur*,ⁱ when assessing the effects of the struggle. It was now his responsibility to rebuild it, this time on Islamic principles.

i Cairo edition.

The first principle nurtured by Shehu Usman is the absolute sanctity of the institution of the caliph. Four points, in particular, are worth considering from Shehu's elaboration of this principle in *Misbah ahl al-Zaman*ⁱ and *Najm al-Ikhwani*ⁱⁱ:

- (i) The caliphal office is an institution of the *shari'a* unanimously accepted by *ahl al-sunna* as valid and imperative.
- (ii) Giving *bay'ah* to the holder of this office is therefore obligatory; so also is showing loyalty to him both inwardly and outwardly, if only for the purpose of ensuring the unity and cohesion of the *umma*. 'Preserving the proper order of the *umma* is obligatory and promoting the well-being of the people is obligatory'; these two obligations cannot be met unless the *bay'ah* itself is secure.
- (iii) The need to preserve the caliphal institution is explicated by the purposes which it serves: it upholds the law and applies the *hudud*; it safeguards the territorial integrity of the Islamic state; it forestalls general disorder and bloodshed. In addition, the institution serves as a channel through which Allah spreads his bounty to the people; the earth and its people are nourished, and nations built and made to flourish by it; the economy thrives and people's wealth is made safe through it; above all, it is the caliphal institution that ensures the glory and supremacy of Islam, eliminates injustice and subdues corrupt people.
- (iv) Therefore, Muslims must think carefully before they throw off their *bay'ah* to this office. They must base their actions on two considerations: firstly, that the injustice of a given caliph may not be in any way comparable to the benefits which the institution itself provides for the *umma*, as a means through which people's welfare is maintained; and secondly, that it is the moral standards of the populace that determine the quality of its rulers. In short, patience rather than rebellion should be the the attitude of the people

i MS in author's possession.

ii Published privately by Alhaji Abdullahi Magayaki.

towards their caliphs. For, if the institution is destroyed, 'Allah will never again cast even a glance on the world.'

It is this principle, above all, that made the Sokoto Caliphate a going concern for a whole century. Certainly there were rebellions and, at times, upheavals of almost catastrophic proportion; but loyalty to the institution of the caliphate, rather than individual caliphs, always prevailed. Moreover, the caliphs never maintained a standing army; they relied on people's loyalty for the defence of the realm against both external and internal enemies. Prof. Last sums up the application of this principle in *The Sokoto Caliphate*:ⁱ 'Collectively, the Caliphate, in moral authority if not in armed force, was too strong to be broken.'

The supremacy of the law as the basis of all actions and policies further strengthened the Caliphate. It was created purposely to uphold the *shari'a* and apply the *hudud*. This principle, Prof. Abdullahi Smithⁱⁱ has pointed out, remained in force throughout the entire life of the Sokoto Caliphate, where rulers had to justify their actions and policies on the basis of the sacred law. As he puts it:

Why must emirs consult their subjects before taking decisions? Because God said so. Why must emirs not take bribes? Because the last of the Prophets of God said so. Throughout the *jihad* literature it is the authority of the Qur'an and the accepted traditions that was invariably quoted to justify the ideals of government which emirs must continually have in mind. No other authority was adequate.

In the final analysis it was the absolute commitment to the application of the *shari'a* in almost all its ramifications – and clearly to a greater degree than can be found in Islamic history outside the *rashidun* period – that upheld the unity of the Caliphate. The *shari'a*, in effect, preserved the Caliphate, and not the other way round. As Prof. Last puts it: 'Respect for the Law and Islam was the source of authority for the Sokoto Caliphate. So long as the Caliph upheld the *shari'a*, he was unimpeachable, and those who denied his authority were unbelievers... The universal nature of the Law, having an existence and validity separate from the Sokoto Caliphate, gave

i Longman (London), 1977.

ii 'The Ideal of Development Administration: an historical perspective', Journal of Public Affairs, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Vol. 1 May, 1971.

Sokoto the power it did not have militarily. The emirs outside Sokoto ... respected this Law, and obeyed Sokoto as established under it... [The Law] gave to their position the same universal legality which the Caliphate possessed.'

The third principle emphasised the necessity for the Caliphate to pursue vigorously the integration of the Muslim *umma*. This entailed first of all the internal organisation of the society to ensure social harmony based on justice and brotherhood. If this required the subduing of venal scholars, rebels and all those who would seek to destroy the harmony of the *umma* by military means, so be it. On the other hand, the policy of integration entailed the absorption of weak and fragmented Muslim communities into the *dar al-Islam*, by peaceful means if possible, or by force of arms if need be. What was required was for the *umma* to remain strong and impregnable: this was a priority. 'It is not lawful,' Shehu stated in *Siraj al-Ikhwan*,ⁱ quoting al-Maghili, 'for a group of Muslims to remain without a ruler' or an effective government. 'So strive against them with the sword until they all enter into [the bond of] obedience to God and His Messenger. This is one of the worthiest and most important *jihads*.' Oppressive rulers in Muslim countries should be fought 'as long as your fighting them is for the victory of the truth over falsehood, and the victory of the oppressed over the oppressor'. But all viable and just Islamic nations must be treated with absolute deference as sister nations belonging to the universal Islamic community. Integration, as conceived in the Caliphate, rests on two pillars: the need to establish Islam as a power above all powers, dictating trends rather than being dictated to; and the imperative for Muslims to resist oppression with the purpose of eliminating it, even if the perpetrators claim to be Muslims.

Then there is the principle that one of the fundamental functions of the Caliphate is to promote the welfare of Muslims and ensure maximum social justice. The Shehu, says Prof. Abdullahi Smith, 'continually cries out against bribery and corruption in government and the general immorality of officials, and emphasises the need

i John Hunwick's translation has been used here. See his 'Al-Maghili's replies to the questions of Askia Al-Hajj Muhammad.' PhD. dissertation, University of London, 1974, pp. 279-47,

for positive action by government to promote the welfare of the people. The chief official of the Sokoto Caliphs held the title *amir al-masalih* which could, I suppose, be translated ... as officer in charge of public welfare.' After noting in *Kitab al-Farq*ⁱ that the system of government which the Caliphate had displaced was characterised by arbitrary rule without respect for the *shari'a*, decadent luxury and universal corruption, as well as dispossession of the poor, the Shehu pledged that the Islamic government would in all respects create a society in which there would be justice and moral rectitude. The Caliphate would effect, as Abdullahi Smith puts it, 'spiritual reform aimed at raising the moral tone of society and providing a social ideology in accordance with Islamic ideas'.

Then there would be universal dissemination of knowledge under a system of education based fundamentally on the Qur'an. There would be a reformed economic system which emphasised improvement of markets, the development of communication and the provision of social services to the poor and needy. The Shehu also promised to safeguard the economic well-being of the state by the strictest judicial control over the financial transactions of government and to promote the moral good of society.

The last principle for our consideration relates to the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims. Here the Shehu established five guidelines aimed at covering the various possibilities in the relationship.

- (i) There is a relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims which is dictated purely by natural human sentiments, such as loving a neighbour, or a beautiful woman or a person from whom one has experienced an act of goodness or kindness. Since this love is inherent, it is outside the sphere of human responsibility, and can be considered to be without blame.
- (ii) A relationship dictated by force of circumstances, where Muslims must necessarily show open deference to non-Muslim powers, is permissible provided the regard shown is 'with the tongue, not the heart'.

i Hiskett's translation, see his '*Kitab al-Farq*: a work on the Habe Kingdoms attributed to Uthman Dan Fodio' in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 25, 1960.

- (iii) Any relationship which involves a severe compromise of Islam's vital interests, such as the surrendering of sovereignty, or of economic independence, and which makes Muslims dependent on non-Muslims, is prohibited.
- (iv) A relationship whose purpose is to help non-Muslims repel oppression, obtain justice or rights due to them and which, in general, is intended to promote noble causes, is obligatory. 'It is permissible,' the Shehu said, 'to walk hand in hand with a Christian in order to fight oppression, or intercede in a good cause.' Moreover, it is necessary for Muslims to treat non-Muslims justly, equitably and compassionately in order to attract them to Islam.
- (v) A relationship where Muslims support non-Muslims in causes contrary to the *shari'a*, such as those intended to weaken Islam or annihilate it or to raise unbelief above Islam is forbidden, as it borders on unbelief,

The Shehu did not leave anyone in doubt as to the kind of state he wanted the Sokoto Caliphate to be: a *dar al-Islam* that would approximate, as far as the exigencies of time could allow, the *Khilafa al-Rashida*, run by the upright caliphs.